

Theme Panel: Denney Wing, Sleight Gallery

### **Lines in the Sand: Land**

The world view of many of the Native American cultures of the West rested on the concept of the circle of life and respect for the harmonious rhythms of nature, where intimate knowledge of the natural resources and understanding of cultural practices was essential for survival. This installation brings indigenous and historic art and culture together in new ways by highlighting our enduring spiritual and material connection to the land.

The local Cahuilla believe their ancestors have walked the desert lands of Coachella Valley and the mountains and canyons of San Jacinto and Santa Rosa since time immemorial. Their cultural beliefs, as with many indigenous peoples, have developed out of a direct relationship to their ancestral lands over thousands of years. Local clay deposits, for example, provided the raw material to make simple but elegant storage and cooking vessels, and special grasses were cultivated and harvested to be fashioned into baskets. The development of these crafts extended beyond basic function into aspects of social, economic, and ceremonial practices, providing aesthetic pleasure and visual enrichment. The works of contemporary artists Gerald Clarke and Cara Romero introduce a new aesthetic illustrating a continuum of ingenuity and creativity that has always characterized Native American art.

The desert's unique environment and transcendent light also attracted twentieth century painters whose landscapes capture the tranquility and appeal of the region. Paintings by Agnes Pelton and James Swinnerton of the mountains, smoke trees, and sand-filled washes share a similar "desert palette" with Native American baskets and clay vessels made from materials gathered in the same area. By presenting contemporary artworks alongside historical artworks, this installation provides a link between the past and the present, highlighting the region's ability to continue to inspire artists.

## **WHIRLING LOG SYMBOL IN NATIVE AMERICAN ART**

The swastika is an ancient symbol used by Eurasian and North and South American cultures. The word comes from the Sanskrit *svastika* which means “good fortune” or “well-being.” Among Native American tribes, the swastika symbol was used in basketry, textiles, pottery, and other art forms. In Navajo iconography it is called the “whirling log” (*tsil no’oli*), a sacred symbol that denotes abundance, prosperity, healing, and good luck. In other Native American cultures it is a symbol of migration or friendship.

Many believe the Nazi movement desecrated this sacred symbol, and in 1940 several Native American tribes signed a proclamation renouncing its use “forever more.” The baskets in this exhibition with the swastika-like symbol, pre-date this 1940 proclamation.

## **CLAY VESSELS**

Beautiful clay vessels were once part of everyday living in the arid regions of Southern California and the Southwest. Essential for survival, these vessels were used for the storage of food and water and for cooking. Some vessels were highly decorated, but the majority of indigenous utilitarian vessels made in Southern California were not. Due to the nature of shallow pit firing, pottery of Southern California is characterized by its rich colors and distinctive “fire clouds,” which are valued for their aesthetic quality. Pueblo and southwest cultures, by contrast, have a long history of employing elaborate, multi-color pottery designs developed over thousands of years, which continues to be a popular practice today.

## **BASKETRY**

*I wish long life for the woman who always has a basket in her hands.*  
--Emma Duskey Frank, Hupa, 1902, excerpt from a Hupa Basket Prayer Song

Women were primarily responsible for mastering the complex art of basket weaving. An extremely demanding art form, it required the weaver to develop an intimate knowledge of their environment, botanical expertise, as well as an understanding of cultural traditions. Historically, baskets pervaded every aspect of native life, from collecting and processing food to supporting sacred practices and community events. The display of utilitarian forms alongside elegant presentation or gift baskets provides an introduction to the aesthetic and diverse cultural heritage that is unique to California basketry.